More News

The Newsletter of the Thomas More Society of America *July 2001*

HIGHLIGHTS

2 **"John Fisher, Thomas More, and the Plans of God's Heart": a homily by John J. O'Donnell, S.J.**

3 **"The Liberal Arts: A Classical Ideal and its Historical Development": a lecture by Michael Mack, Ph.D, of The Catholic University of America.**

UPCOMING EVENTS:

The board of the Society is well underway in planning for the next annual dinner, to be held on November 30th. Once again, it promises to be a memorable event. Please look for more information on the speaker and other details, as well as your invitation, in the upcoming months.

On June 19, 2001, The Thomas More Society was honored to have His Eminence Theodore Cardinal McCarrick as homilist for the annual Sts. More and Fisher feastday mass. Although we do not have a written copy of his extemporaneous homily, Sr. O'Donnell provided a homily by John O'Donnell, S.J., from an earlier year—in which the feastday fell, similarly, on the Feast of the Sacred Heart. The transcript follows:

JOHN FISHER, THOMAS MORE
AND THE PLANS OF GOD'S HEART

Sister Anne O'Donnell, S.N.D., has provided us with the translation of a homily preached by her Jesuit brother in the parish church of Saint Pancratius, Tubingen-Buhl, Western Germany, on 22 June 1979. It has the more significance as it was preached by an unofficial amicus in a church not dedicated to the English martyrs.

In the German language one often uses the expression "was mir am Herzen liegt" (what lies on my heart). This way of expressing what one truly desires is one which we do not have in the English language and is one of the German usages which I have always particularly liked. I think that it could also be the starting point for our reflections on the meaning of the feast we are celebrating today. For what lies on the heart of God is Jesus Christ. In him the heart of God is revealed. If we ask: who is God? What are his thoughts, his purposes for the world?—we can only find the answer if we meditate upon Jesus-Christ. Apart from him we cannot have a proper understanding of God.

According to the Christian faith the culmination of this revelation of God is the cross. Jesus says: There is no greater love than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Jesus, the Son, the One sent by God, surrenders his life on the cross for our sake. As one of our Tubingen theologians puts it: on the cross the triune God reveals his heart.

Today we have the happy accident, that we celebrate not only the feast of the Sacred Heart but also the feast of the two great English martyrs, John Fisher and Thomas More.

Fisher is especially important for me, since he played a significant role in the history of Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Because of him, Lady Margaret Beaufort, the grandmother of Henry VIII, endowed a chair of theology in each of these two Universities. My own doctoral supervisor, Professor John Macquarrie, at present holds this chair of theology in Oxford. Fisher also introduced the study of Greek into the university curriculum, so that for the first time since the patristic period the New Testament could be read in the language in which it was written.

Thomas More was one of the greatest intellectuals in Europe: a humanist and politician as well as a model of family life. Erasmus spoke of him as the greatest thinker of his age.

Because More opposed the divorce of the King and refused to recognize the King as head of the Church of England, he was arrested and finally executed.

More suffered in prison especially from loneliness and the feeling of abandonment. His books were taken from him. Family visits were permitted only for the purpose of seeking to persuade him to alter his convictions. The lies of the government officials led him to believe that even Fisher had deserted him and approved the divorce. In the last months he turned to the sufferings of Christ and composed meditations upon the Passion.

With these facts in mind, I said earlier that it is a happy accident that we celebrate his feast today with that of the Sacred Heart. On the cross the heart of God is revealed. In the abandonment of his imprisonment and death More was initiated into this Mystery. Let us then pray today through his intercession, that we will be able to cling to the counsels of the Lord, to the plans of his heart (Psalm 33, Introit of Mass for the Sacred Heart), even in our experience of the cross. -John J. O'Donnell, S.J.

At the Army/Navy Club luncheon on May 15th, Dr. Michael Mack of the Catholic University of America delivered a lecture on the lifelong pursuit of liberal learning. The talk was delivered previously in the National Basilica to Catholic University students and faculty. The full text follows.

I'm delighted to have the opportunity to talk to you about the liberal arts. I originally wrote this talk for an incoming freshman class at CUA. My intention was to encourage them to reflect on what they were about to undertake, to get them to ask the radical question: "What really is the point of college anyway?" I wanted to make sure that when the lecture was over all of them realized that college is not simply "what you do after high school"—merely a modern rite of passage, one that transforms financially dependent adolescents into productive (or at least income-generating) members of society. What I offered them and what I will offer you today is a sketch of the development of the idea of the liberal arts. Starting with antiquity, I'll proceed chronologically and try to show how the idea of the liberal arts developed over time. My hope is

that this historical perspective on the place of the liberal arts in western culture will give us a fuller sense of what a liberal arts education could be today. My hope is that in an idea of the liberal arts, we might find an ideal, one that can give meaning and direction to one's intellectual life—both in school and beyond.

Liberal Arts in Antiquity

The liberal arts were first discussed as such in late antiquity, when there arose various attempts to systematize Greek and Roman ideas on education. One particularly useful innovation from this period was the invention of the encyclopedia. Another was the organization of learning into different subjects, seven of which were given the name "liberal arts." These seven were subdivided into two groups, the trivium and the quadrivium. The three arts of the trivium—grammar, rhetoric, and logic—offered training in thinking and expressing thoughts. The four arts of the quadrivium—arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy—extended that training by introducing the mind to numbers and the discovery of numbers in the external world. Like our SAT, the ancients divided the world of learning into Verbal and Math; unlike us (it's worth noting), they didn't use Math to keep score.

Why the name "liberal"? Like us, the ancients tended to define terms by their opposites. But for them, the opposite of "liberal" was not "conservative." It was, rather, "servile"—not a very complimentary term, and one that reveals the elitism of the original idea of liberal studies. The servile arts were for those who had to earn a living—in particular, slaves. The liberal arts, on the other hand, were for those who, instead of having to provide for the material needs of society, could dedicate themselves to intellectual tasks that need not bear fruit right away. "Liberal" for the ancients indicated "liberty," or "freedom." In studying the liberal arts, one is enjoying one's freedom, freedom from having to make oneself useful today and now. The term "school," which in its Greek and Latin origins means "leisure," points to this same correlation of learning and freedom. Whereas we generally think of school as work, the ancients thought of it as just the opposite. For the ancients, school was a leisure activity. They would not have spoken of it as we might—as an investment in human capital—but they understood that this leisure is the basis of a flourishing culture.

For the ancients, a liberal spirit is, by definition, "liberating." The image they used is instructive: Liberal studies free the mind just like a farmer clears a field. Once freed from debris, the mind can be planted with ideas, which will grow into a whole crop of ideas. It is no accident

that what the farmer does is called "agriculture," and what the liberal arts accomplish is called "culture." They start with a mental weed patch and produce a cultivated mind. They broaden the mind, freeing it from bias and egoism and opening it to a higher vision, a truer judgment, and an appreciation of what is best.

Middle Ages

Although antiquity invented the liberal arts, it did not have the last word on the subject. In the Christian and feudal culture of medieval Europe, the liberal arts were valued not only as ends in themselves but also as means for training scholars for higher studies—namely, in theology, which became "the queen of the arts." Like a good and kind monarch, Theology governed the other arts and directed them toward their true and ultimate end—helping her people know, love, and serve God. Like good liege men, the liberal arts, for their part, pledged their freedom in her service. Whereas the aristocratic culture of pagan antiquity thought of serving as "servile," and thus something beneath the liberal arts, medieval Christian scholars saw the dignity of service in the example of Christ, who came not to be served but to serve. This new outlook was not a break from the ancient liberal arts tradition. It was, rather, a development and transformation of it. The new approach valued freedom, but it recognized that the best use of freedom is service, and that there is a higher freedom than that which the liberal arts can deliver—the freedom that comes from being a son or daughter of God.

But let me warn you, there is a darker, far less edifying side to the history of the liberal arts. Even in the best families there are what we now call "issues," and the liberal arts are no exception. Expert in organizing knowledge and partial to hierarchical arrangements, the Middle Ages produced an integrated vision of knowledge, but one that elevated some arts at the expense of others. As had been the case in antiquity, philosophy was given a preeminent position among the liberal arts: it received the distinct privilege of serving as the "handmaid of Theology." Though generally a very good eldest sibling, she could at times be smug, or even snide. The other arts didn't like always being compared to Philosophy—a nasty habit started by ancient philosophers. The other arts certainly didn't like Seneca calling them "puny and puerile" in comparison.[1] The Poets in particular had cause for resentment, with Plato talking about throwing at least some of the poets out of his Republic. This attitude persisted into the Middle

[1] *Epist.* 88.

Ages and is evident in the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, who, in his ranking of the arts, gave poetry the medieval equivalent of the booby prize.

Renaissance

But with the next stage in the development of the liberal arts, the Renaissance, the other arts took their revenge. Although Philosophy often still reigned supreme, the poets, painters, mathematicians, musicians, and historians all had their moments on top. Rivalries between the arts came out into the open, and they often led to debates over the relative merits of the arts. In these debates you could hear learned versions of such classic arguments as "My dad can beat up your dad." Though I teach the poets, I won't take advantage of the situation here to rehearse the gory details of poetry's revenge on philosophy. I won't say anything about the greater antiquity of poetry, nor anything about how the poets were in fact the first philosophers. In a spirit of generosity I'll pass over the Renaissance arguments about how poetry combines the deep truths of philosophy with the lively detail of history to produce works that don't merely show you what is good, but have the power to move you to embrace that good.

In the Renaissance the liberal arts played a central role in the ubiquitous arguments concerning the dignity of man. Bringing together the revealed truth that man is created in the image of God and the ideal of the liberal arts as cultivating what is best in human nature, Christian neo-Platonists like Ficino and Pico della Mirandola argue that it is through the study of the liberal arts that one perfects one's nature and becomes like God. That their neo-Platonism got the upper hand on their Christianity can be seen in their making the art of magic the capstone of the liberal arts. But that they would do so is not difficult to understand when one realizes that they lived before the birth of modern science. Magic for them was the fulfillment of natural science. Through study and self-denial, magi, or wise men, come to understand the secrets of nature that most people fail to discern. It followed that in knowing the deep and hidden truths of things, the principles of things, they know nature the way that God knows it. And like God, they are able to control it with their knowledge.

This exaltation of learning and optimistic view of human nature was, however, at odds with the experience of human fallibility and with the dogma of original sin. In rapid response to this optimism was an assertion of the vanity of learning. In Florence, there was the reform of Savonarola, and his annual bonfire of vanities, in which books were among the more valuable items that went up in flames. By the time the Renaissance reaches England, these twin

traditions—the dignity of man and the vanity of human endeavors—are two sides of the same coin. One of the finest examples of this sense of the two-sidedness of the human condition is a painting by Hans Holbein the younger—not the portrait of Thomas More, but his painting of the two French Ambassadors to the court of Henry VIII. Confident but wary, they are poised and substantial. One is the embodiment of political competence: dressed in ermine, he has a chain around his neck signifying his office, and he holds an ornate dagger sheath. The other figure has the dress of a cleric. Between the two of them span the spiritual and secular worlds of power. But between them in the composition is a table, on which are items that signify the four arts of the quadrivium: a lute for music, a right angle and compass for geometry, a book on mathematics, and a celestial globe for astronomy. The two men are, significantly, leaning on this table. Their power rests on their accomplishment in the liberal arts. But what makes the painting especially interesting is a figure in the foreground, which is difficult to discern—unless one views the painting from an awkward sideways angle. If one looks at the paining awry, one sees that this figure is a skull. And one realizes that this painting is about the power of the liberal arts and, at the same time, the vanity of that power.

A similar treatment of the vanity of learning is evident a half-century later in Marlowe and Shakespeare. Marlowe's Faustus is a doctor who, after mastering all the arts and sciences, turns to magic. Shakespeare's Prospero is a magus who, through love of the liberal arts and secret studies, loses his dukedom. He says, "My library was dukedom large enough." Marlowe presents Faustus's magic as overreaching, a perverse attempt to rise above the human condition, an intellectual lust for forbidden fruit that mirrors Lucifer's original refusal to accept his place in the universe. Whereas Faustus is torn to bits by devils, Prospero abjures his magic and returns to Milan, trading in the extraordinary powers of a magus for the ordinary political powers of a duke. In the magic of Faustus and Prospero the idea of knowledge as power is taken to its logical conclusion in a pre-scientific world. For both magi, knowledge no longer an end in itself; it is something that gives power over nature and—significantly—over other persons. The liberal arts thus reach their pinnacle in the magus, and at that point are inverted, and become highly useful, even manipulative.

At just this time, magical knowledge is undergoing an alchemical transformation, and fifty years later it has emerged as modern science. Whereas Marlowe and Shakespeare showed how magic could be used for inhuman purposes, Milton showed the danger of the newly born

science becoming an inhuman activity. In *Paradise Lost*, when the angel Raphael comes to visit Eden, Adam anachronistically realizes that he has a tremendous opportunity to resolve one of the greatest crises of learning in human history: he asks Raphael to tell him whether the sun rotates around the earth or whether the earth goes round the sun. In Raphael's response, Milton caps the tradition of the dignity and danger of learning. He tells Adam not to worry about how the heavens go but, rather, to be "lowly wise." In effect he is saying that Adam's job is not to be a good astronomer but to be a good man. To use a later formulation, Raphael says that the proper study for mankind is man.

Modern Period

Raphael's warning about the danger science poses to humanity was not heeded by Adam and Eve—they ate the apple. Their heirs have suffered the consequences, and part of that suffering since the seventeenth century has been the great division between science and the humanities. Besides original sin, one very important reason for opposition between knowledge of the cosmos and knowledge of human well-being is the new importance given to knowledge by Francis Bacon. It is largely against Bacon's utilitarian program of knowledge that Milton reacts. Bacon's innovative claim that "knowledge is power" (which lives on barely altered in our talk of education as empowerment) puts useful knowledge above liberal knowledge. Arguably, Bacon reduces the intellect to mere intelligence and knowledge to its poor relation, know-how. Emphasizing the practical and the technological, Bacon takes away the noble freedom of knowledge and makes it the servant of making and doing. Although Bacon did work to free the mind from bias, he unwittingly enslaved it to utility.

This distinction between the useful and the liberal arts is reflected in the new custom that arose of dividing the liberal arts into not seven but three branches. Although a number of schemes for dividing the arts were proposed, as most college course catalogues indicate, the winner was the division into the humanities, the natural sciences, and the social sciences. The logic of this division, as far as I can discern it, is that the humanities, which center on human self-expression through the written word, are the successors of the trivium. The natural sciences, which use mathematical methods to study the external world, grew out of the quadrivium. The innovation was the gradual development of the third branch, the social sciences, which resembled the humanities insofar as they studied human beings, but resembled the natural sciences in their use of mathematical methods.

In this new scheme of the arts it is fair to say that there has been a shift from an emphasis on the unity of knowledge to an emphasis on the practical benefit of dividing knowledge into distinct fields. This emphasis on division became especially important in Germany in the nineteenth century, where the modern research university was born. The idea was that the best way to know all there is to know is to divide up the work. Division and specialization became the standard. In our country, Johns Hopkins and then Catholic University were started with the German research university as their model. Shortly after, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and other established schools retooled themselves to start producing Ph.D.'s.

The research university is an expression of a very optimistic attitude toward learning. The university is, of course, a medieval invention. It was in its origins an ambitious undertaking. The very name indicates this: the university is a place where the entire universe of knowledge is present. At the university a student enters into the complete circle of learning—which is the name of that other great medieval invention, the encyclopedia. The research university takes its medieval ancestor and adds the idea of progress. Its innovation is to say that if we divide up knowledge into its various fields and proceed methodically, knowledge will advance until finally we have everything figured out.

Whereas the medieval encyclopedia and university, in their very names, point to a belief in the unity of knowledge, the modern research university, with its characteristic division into departments, manifests a faith in the division of labor. It would be mere contrarianism to dismiss the great and proven advantages of this institutional organization. But it would be a lack of historical perspective not to recognize what has been lost. Instead of a universe of learning, universities now offer multiple universes of knowledge—either colliding with or ignoring one another. They are not universities but multiversities, and practically speaking they have given up on the unity of truth—even as an unachievable ideal. The current emphasis on interdisciplinary studies attests to the "disintegration" of knowledge in the university. These attempts to get various fields to work together—something that is very difficult since they now speak different languages—grow out of the widely recognized need to reintegrate knowledge. For Newman, the solution was clear: theology had to be at the center of the university. It was revealed truth that ordered, in a respectful and helpful way, the various subjects. If Newman is right, today's hope in interdisciplinary dialogue is a false hope unless it is united to a faith in the ultimate unity of truth.

As I bring this historical tour of the development of the liberal arts to a close, let me summarize the four historical conceptions of the liberal arts I've covered so far: Antiquity gave us the liberal arts as ends in themselves; the Middle Ages gave us the liberal arts as a training for serving God and one another; the Renaissance gave us the liberal arts as the humanities, which emphasize that the proper study of mankind is Man; Modernity gives us the humanities in the shadow of Science, bruised, battered, but not dead yet.

By way of a conclusion, I would suggest that this historical sketch can remind us of some lost ideals, which, if properly translated and updated, can provide some real help in addressing the challenges we face today. Drawing from all the periods perhaps we could come up with an ideal of the liberal arts suited for our time. Let me close with the suggestion that that ideal of the liberal arts in our time may look something like this: a cultivation of the mind that frees one to serve others; that frees one to discover with others what it is to be human; and that frees one to work with others to build a culture—including scientific culture—that serves the genuine needs of humanity and promotes authentic human freedom.

It is apparent that the liberal arts do not have the same prestige they once had. Science has made huge advances, and despite Milton's exquisite efforts to remind us that the knowledge gained by looking through Galileo's telescope is not the same as wisdom, scientific and technological know-how overshadow the humanities in the modern world. Though bruised, battered, and pretty thoroughly intimidated, the humanities are not yet dead. Milton famously declared that "books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them.... A good book is the precious lifeblood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life."

The Great Books Programs are one sign of life. In its habit of looking back to antiquity, the Renaissance started a tradition that we now call the Great Books Tradition. It's hard for us to imagine the excitement of the rediscovery of classical antiquity. Each week the New York Times prints its lists of best sellers. For the year 2000, several lists of the most important books of the century were drawn up. Well, in the Renaissance they had books coming out like Homer's *Iliad and Odyssey*, the works of Sophocles, the dialogues of Plato, Plutarch's *Lives*. The histories of Herodotus and Thucydides. Machiavelli, a humanist, though hardly a humane one, would read Cicero in the evening, and write him letters in the morning. He'd give Cicero

political advice, and when he'd read the following night that Cicero didn't follow it, he'd complain to him in another letter. Liberal education is, in a sense, engaging in a conversation with the greatest minds from all times. Reading the Great Books is to enter into the great conversation. This ideal was very much alive in the earlier part of the last century (the 20th Century, that is). Places like Columbia University and the University of Chicago, and many smaller colleges like St. John's College in Annapolis had, and to an extent still have famous courses in which students are initiated into this great conversation.

And even the nineteenth century, which gave us the rather inhuman rigor of the German research university, also produced one of the greatest defenses of liberal education, John Henry Newman's *Idea of a University*. Witnessing the greatest industrial boom the world has ever seen, writing when the theorists of utilitarianism and spirit-numbing practicality were ascendant, Cardinal Newman asserted the unequivocal value of the study of the liberal arts.

Defense of the Humanities

As I mentioned, it is possible to bring a large and liberal spirit even to the most practical subjects. Similarly, one can bring a servile spirit to that which is most ennobling and liberating. Now whether students decide to major in the humanities; or in the natural or social sciences; or in music or drama; or in something useful like architecture or engineering, nursing or social work, I encourage them to adopt a liberal approach to their education. I tell them not to become too practical too soon. The ubiquitous assumption in our culture is that for something to be good it should be useful. And it follows that our culture—in the person of your Uncle Harry—is deeply suspicious of people and activities that claim they are exempt from having to make themselves useful. Well, the humanities, though in one sense useless and held in suspicion, are in fact eminently useful in our practical culture. For every culture has a blind spot. The humanities are like a bothersome drivers' ed. instructor: they keep reminding the culture to check its blind spot. Not surprisingly, just like any self-respecting driver, our culture resents this advice. It says, "I know what I'm doing," and then blames someone or something else for the crack-up. My advice to the life-long learner is not for you to become back-seat drivers in our society, but to learn from the humanities how to check your *own* blind spot. What you think is useless might be exactly what you need most.

While busily going about your business, do not turn a deaf ear to the humanities. Listen to their call and you will be drawn not so much away from your business as back to your

humanity. Plato or Shakespeare or Mozart or Rembrandt will bring you to unknown parts of yourself and will help you discover what it is to be truly and fully human. We think that if there's anything we know, we know what it is to be human. We are, after all, pretty fair specimens of the species. But the humanities remind us that we often are most ignorant of what we are most assured. Don't assume you already know what it is to be human. As you grow in confidence, don't make the mistake of taking yourself—and your human nature—for granted. It is my contention that the humanities today combine the best of the Ancient, medieval, and Renaissance liberal arts traditions, that they free us from a narrow approach to life and train us to better comprehend the reality we encounter, in all of its dimensions. But even the drivers' ed. instructor has a blind spot. If the humanities are true to themselves, they must admit their limitation. They cultivate the intellect, but they do not train the will. Nor can they save the soul. They can help us appreciate the beauty of the soul and the horror of self-alienation, but the power to save souls belongs to religion. The humanities can free us from ignorance, but they can't free us from sin. They can cultivate in us good judgment, but they can't give us a good conscience. The freedom that the humanities give is distinctive, and no religion, not even Christianity can provide a substitute. But the freedom that Christianity gives far surpasses anything the humanities can give, and it reminds the humanities of the *full* freedom toward which all human activity, the humanities included, should be oriented.

A few moments ago I was extolling the humanities, and now I'm warning you against idolatrous devotion to them. Would that such idolatry tempted you just a little. I hope these reflections have given you some tools for thinking about the liberal arts, perhaps in a fuller way. But I imagine they have also left you somewhat confused. For that, I'll accept some of the blame. But I won't say I'm disappointed. For my hope is not that you have a succinct definition of the liberal arts, but that you begin to think in a different—and more liberal—way about the purpose of education. To the student in all of us, here's to good luck reflecting on where we've come from and where we're headed. May our confusion be healthy and our search for clarification sustained and productive.